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A COMPARATIVE VIEW OF THE WOMAN SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT.

BY FRANCES M. ABBOTT.

To argue either for or against woman suffrage would seem out of date at the present time. Everything that can be said theoretically on the subject has been said in so many ways, by persons of various degrees of culture and fairness of temper, that the topic has almost ceased to be included in the list of interesting debates. And yet the subject has staying qualities, as can be proved by the numbers of earnest advocates who cheerfully continue to besiege the State legislatures, and, what is more significant, the formation of anti-woman-suffrage societies among intelligent women.

I propose to treat the subject from the comparative point of view—that is, to consider its outcome in the light of the history of other reforms, and especially of those which relate to the status of women.

The arguments against woman suffrage, as I recall them, are, that it would be useless, expensive, detrimental to the best interests of women, inimical to marriage and otherwise destructive to the home; that women do not want it, that they are not mentally fitted for it, that it would impose upon them greater physical burdens than they could endure, that the polls are not fit places for women, that the female sex cannot perform military duty, that women are sufficiently represented as it is, that the ballot would brush the bloom of delicacy from the female temperament, that it would be subversive of the best interests of the Republic, that it is against nature.

Incidentally, it has been stated, and these indirect reproaches often have more weight than arguments, that many of the foremost advocates of the cause are not beautiful, that they are care-

less in dress, that they are old maids, that they are not church members, that they do not eat ice-cream with forks, that they are cranks, and, generally speaking, poor, unfashionable and unpopular.

I cannot see the permanent value of any of these arguments, because every one of them has been urged with equal force against the entrance of women into medicine and against the admission of women to college. It is the same with the innuendoes. It does not require a very long memory to recall when every one of the reproaches was applied to the first women physicians and to the first women graduates. Even now we occasionally hear these reproaches, because people rarely separate the cause from the coincidence.

I cannot see why suffrage for woman is not in line with every other change in her opportunities that has occurred during the last half century. I make this statement simply as a historical student. It is difficult to fix the beginnings of movements, because there are always sporadic instances before the general tendency becomes marked, but the last fifty years may be said to cover the most striking changes in woman's advance as a human being. The first Woman's Rights Convention was called in July, 1848. The subject had been occasionally discussed before, but I believe this date marks the beginning of the concerted agitation. Associated with the demands for the ballot made by this convention were demands for industrial opportunities for women, changes in the laws relating to the holding of property by wives, admission to the medical and other professions, advanced education, and general independence of thought and action. These changes have nearly all been made in precisely the order in which they were most needed. Theoretically the ballot ought to have come first, but practically it can wait till the last.

The most imperative demand is the bread-and-butter one; hence the industrial opportunities were first opened. Women had been elementary teachers and dressmakers during Colonial times, because these occupations were carried on largely under the protection of the home, and did not greatly differ from tending children and spinning and weaving under the family roof-tree. The establishment of the factory system may be said to mark woman's entrance into general industrial life. Driven by the lack of ready money in rural communities to seek sustenance

elsewhere, the farmers' daughters sought employment in factories some years before Mrs. Stanton and Lucretia Mott signed the call for the first convention. But the factories, good as they were, supplied relief only to a small and special class. The majority of adult women were married, and the atrocious pecuniary subjection in which they were held by the old English common law could not fail to secure statutory relief in a time when the whole country was torn by anti-slavery discussion and other demands for individual rights. Statutes in relation to property-holding by married women were enacted as early as 1848, and these changes have continued to the present decade till in some States the laws are even more favorable to women than to men.

The need for women in the medical profession was so apparent that they gained entrance there long before they engaged in journalism, law, the ministry or architecture. I am making a general statement and not considering individual or exceptional cases. The usefulness of the woman physician to the community seemed rather more direct than the usefulness of the college woman, whose education was presumably gained for self-culture; hence the medical diploma anteceded the diploma of liberal arts. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell received her degree in 1849, and the first college for the liberal education of women was opened in 1865. We must remember, however, that only a few hundred women physicians were graduated before 1865, and that the higher education for women was not unknown before Vassar opened its doors. Still I think it may be fair to say that the special professional training as a movement antedated the general culture.

During and after the upheaval of the Civil War new avenues rapidly opened. Women entered the government service as clerks. They became bookkeepers in stores where they formerly had been only saleswomen. And so gradually, until the invention of the typewriter; and then, with a sudden rush, women have become clerks, secretaries, and assistants in every department of mercantile life, in railroad, newspaper, and professional offices, in banks, post-offices, and state departments. Positions requiring greater general culture, like advanced educational and library work, have been secured at a more recent date.

Increased independence in thought and action has been going on all the while. When women began to speak in the early anti-

slavery meetings, they were hooted at, not only because the opinions they uttered were considered fanatical, but because it was such an indecent thing for women to speak in public at all. We have changed all that, and the decline of the popular lecture and the rise of the special lecture before small audiences will undoubtedly make public speaking by women even more common than it is now. The church is the stronghold of conservatism, but there are few religious meetings now where the voice of woman is not heard. The marvellous growth of club life is bringing to the front those who thought they never, never could do such things. It may be well to remind some of the women who are now joining clubs as a fashionable fad that the pioneer clubs, Sorosis of New York, and the Woman's Club of Boston, both established thirty years ago, never could have existed, if their founders had not been willing to brave sneers, caricatures, and the cold shoulder of society. We do not hear the epithet "strong-minded" in these days, but the early club members were nothing else. Alice Cary was put forward as the first President of Sorosis, because, although a suffragist, it was rightly felt that her personality and influence would help to counteract the ridicule which the "unfeminine" movement was sure to meet.

The invention of the electric light has made the streets of our cities safe for women at midnight. The interest in athletics and all kinds of outdoor amusements is evolving a rational dress for women. Except for a few absurdities, for which fashion is responsible, such as the high, starched collar on the shirt waist, and the long skirt worn on the street, which the bicycle bids fair to render obsolete, the dress of women to-day is healthful. I stood not long ago on the campus of a woman's college, which has never been considered lacking in conservatism, and saw the girls play basketball in bloomers and sweaters. I could not help thinking of the days of their grandmothers, when loose skirts, pantalets, and slippers were considered the suitable attire for modest maidens, and every kind of physical exercise was denied them. I need not have gone so far for a radical change in public opinion. The alumnae of only ten years' standing were mourning because the college in their day supplied nothing better than boarding-school calisthenics.

I cannot conceive of anything that women could do in the future that would shock the public now as the things they actu-

ally are doing would have shocked the public of thirty, twenty, or even ten years ago. Women attend the business meetings of corporations, and in some cases, notably small manufacturing or business concerns, if they have a large amount of money invested, they serve as directors, even as presidents and treasurers. They vote on school matters in the majority of the States. They have full suffrage in Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho and municipal suffrage in Kansas. Even in States where they do not vote, women are frequently seen at the polls, notably members of the W. C. T. U., who go for the purpose of distributing ballots or providing coffee in the interests of temperance.

We see the same changes in social life. Years ago a man's club was the one spot where a woman could not set her foot. It was generally supposed that the moral tone of the place was such that she would not wish to go there if she could. Customs have changed so much that women not only visit the club on "ladies' nights," but they are actually invited to the restaurant on ordinary days. Almost all the newer clubs, especially those in the country and those connected with athletic interests, make provision for women, and in some cases the club suppers are almost as domestic as family parties. Last winter I attended a meeting of a woman's society at a man's club in one of our great cities. The club men were not invited to the meeting, but the courtesy of a portion of their house was extended for the day, because the society was a noted one and the club could offer finer accommodations than any hotel. Some of the ladies, when enjoying the perfect appointments of the dressing and dining rooms, remarked that it was a pity that women should ever undertake housekeeping when men had shown that they could do it so much better.

The great obstacle to woman suffrage, acknowledged by its friends and foes, is that the majority of women do not want it; and this majority, with seeming inconsistency, seems to be as large among thinking women as among the unthinking. But I do not regard this obstacle as insuperable, for an illogical state of affairs cannot endure forever. That subtle, elusive force known as public opinion is subject to the most sudden changes, and no one can ever tell how small a thing may start it. Sometimes a mechanical invention puts an entirely new phase upon a subject which has been argued about for years. Gail Hamilton was not

altogether wrong when she said that the man who first made rubber boots for woman had done more for her advancement than all the agitators, male and female, who had ever spoken on the subject. And yet the agitators have their place. They are always extremists, people of one idea, who lash public opinion until it bestirs itself. Garrison was undoubtedly a fanatic, even an anarchist, but his statue stands to-day on the most fashionable avenue of the city through whose streets he was once dragged with a halter about his neck.

The advocates of woman suffrage can afford to be dignified at this stage. So much of what they asked, conjointly with the ballot, has been granted that the latter seems only a question of time. The other things came first because the need of them was more apparent. The advantages of the ballot for women have probably been greatly overestimated, just as the advantages of the ballot for men have. It is the way with all panaceas. Sidney Smith, ever witty, never said a wiser thing than when speaking of the Great Reform Bill in 1831: "There will be mistakes at first, as there are in all changes. Young ladies will imagine, as soon as this bill is carried, that they will be instantly married, school-boys believe that gerunds and supines will be abolished, and that currant tarts must ultimately come down in price; the corporal and sergeant are sure of double pay; bad poets will expect a demand for their epics; fools will be disappointed, as they always are; reasonable men, who know what to expect, will find that a very serious good has been obtained."

We always expect too startling changes after an innovation, particularly if it is one to which we are opposed. I saw but a few months ago a fling in a magazine because the admission of women to medicine had produced no great specialist who had made the theory or practice very different from what they were before; also a sneer, because no towering genius had appeared among the thousands of college-bred women. But not even the writer of this article would deny that the world is somewhat different to-day because of the women physicians and the women graduates. We do not want the great specialists or the towering geniuses nearly so much as we need the quiet, faithful work of numbers of apparently commonplace people who are insensibly moulding society to better ways.

The progress of school suffrage for women is an example of

what we might reasonably expect from political suffrage. In my own State, women have voted on school matters for about twenty years, and as no tax is required, the system has had a fair chance. If I were asked what great benefits had accrued I could not honestly say that gerunds and supines had been abolished, but in regard to the currant tarts, there might be a question. The tarts may not have come down in price, but their making and other forms of cooking have been introduced into the schools, so that the tarts are more abundant than formerly. All the young women have not got married, but a goodly number of them, whether married or not, vote on the school question.

The progress of events was something like this in a representative city. At the first election only one or two women were present, and these were pronounced advocates of woman's voting. As time went by, the number slowly increased; many women thought they ought to vote, but did not quite dare, they had been taught from their childhood that it was so improper. Finally, a question came up which seemed to involve a moral principle. The town was canvassed, and women as well as men appeared in great numbers. The good won. Since then matters have settled down, and women now vote as a matter of course. If you should go to the polls at an election, you would meet precisely the same class of women there that you would see at an afternoon tea. The number of male and female voters is about equal. The total number, when no exciting question is up, is small compared with the total adult population, because most people believe in letting well enough alone; and when there are no complaints, the same members of the board of education are allowed to serve till they die or resign.

It is difficult to say just what progress is due to the women voters, because all events are intertwined. The election of women as members of the board, which has been a pronounced good, probably would not have occurred had not women first voted. Rare instances might be found, in the small villages of the State, where women held office before they had school suffrage, but the custom of electing women as members of the school committee, which is now general throughout the State, did not obtain till suffrage was granted. It is interesting to note that it was not the votes of women that elected the women, for I have

never known an instance of a woman's ticket running in opposition to a man's ticket. The election of women came about because of the gradual change in public opinion after the granting of suffrage. When women could vote, and did vote, it was absurd to say that they should not hold office; and, as fast as suitable candidates were presented, men and women voted for them as a matter of course. This is a point worth noting by the anti-suffragists, for some of them seem to think that in politics a majority of women would be on one side of every question and a majority of men on the other; and, if the women could not defend their victories by military force, there would be an end to the Republic.

Many changes have come about in the schools since women voted, such as the introduction of cooking, sewing, and manual training beside great improvements in the sanitary arrangements; but these may be partly due to the progress of the times. I am certain that the suffrage of women has had one effect. It would be impossible now to elect a candidate whose character was considered unfit for office, though such candidates have occasionally served in previous times.

At present the woman suffrage question seems in a fair way to solve itself without much help from anyone. The fact that suffrage has actually been secured in some portions of the West, and that the sun still rises and sets on those domains as of yore, shows that the movement is very likely to spread, especially as other portions of the country have become accustomed to seeing some form of woman's voting. Women at present do not want political suffrage, but some crisis might arise when they would want it very much, and then there would be a land-slide of public opinion. They do not want it now because they were not brought up that way; they do not approve of it; they do not think it nice. Such sentiments form the bulwark of conservatism in regard to our manners and customs; but people not yet beyond middle age have seen changes enough in these very manners and customs to make the Sphinx smile.

The bicycle is a case in point. A dozen years ago, when the machine had unequal wheels, one the size of a centre table and the other the size of a dinner plate, only men rode. There were probably many daring misses who wished they could emulate their brothers, and surreptitiously tried to learn. I knew of one girl

who broke her arm in an attempt of this sort. The matter was hushed up as much as possible on account of the extreme mortification of the family, but the result was privately spoken of as an awful example to young girls of conduct unseemly for their sex.

We know the result of the invention of the safety bicycle ; but even this result was not instantaneous. Only nine years ago I was with a party at a mountain resort, and one of the ladies said that she was intending to get a bicycle. "You mean a tricycle, I suppose," politely said a gentleman. "No, a bicycle," was the reply, and the suppressed astonishment of the company could be felt. Even three years ago I knew many ladies who spoke in this wise : "Of course, I know there are respectable women who ride, and it is very well for working-girls, who have no other means of recreation, but I never should wish to see my daughter doing anything of the sort." The indescribable aloofness conveyed in the tone of voice was something like that I heard ten years before when a young woman was about to enter college. "Going to college?" was the unsympathetic comment, as if the person lived in another world. "Oh, fitting yourself for a teacher, I suppose?"

I have lived to see the woman who never wished her daughter to have a bicycle ride a wheel herself in company with that daughter ; and when I ventured to recall her former opinions she said, with unblushing serenity : "Oh, well, everybody rides now ; the most fashionable people have taken it up ; there is really nothing like it," and she began to chide me because I did not own a wheel. The bishop who thought it was not necessary for women to go to college unless they expected to become teachers has united his sons in marriage to college women. The woman who thought that female physicians might do well enough in simple cases, but that they never could be really successful, because in time of peril you would always call in a man, you know, is now spending her property to graduate her daughter from a medical college. If I should say anything to any of these people about their embracing what they so recently despised, they would reply in the language of the bicycle woman : "Oh, well, everybody does it now ; the most fashionable people have taken it up ; there is really nothing like it."

I sometimes think that inconsistency is the most prominent

characteristic of human nature, but the most delightful example I ever knew is the action of the anti-woman-suffragists, who are petitioning legislatures, appearing before committees of men, taking part in politics, and, in brief, doing precisely the things that they beg they shall never be allowed to do. The "antis" are really gaining considerable strength among the better classes in some of the cities, and this is to me the most marked sign that woman-suffrage may be nearer than we think.

I have not yet attained great age, but the world has turned around many times since I became a passenger on this planet. People who occupied front rows in the seats of the scornful and perked up their noses in disdain at the lowly have gone down on their knees to what they once considered a worm in the dust. I may not live beyond the allotted age of man, but I firmly expect before I die that some of those who now sneer at woman's rights, woman's suffrage, and the like, will come around to solicit me to subscribe for a statue to Amelia Bloomer or a monument to Susan B. Anthony.

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